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ABSTRACT

Families are rule-governed systems of interdependent individuals whose interaction follows an intricate pattern of behavior. Communication patterns in a family reflect and emerge from contradictions in rules. A function may be defined as something that a system does and must do if it is not to break down. For instance identity and stability involve the performance of a family function, since failure to achieve both usually leads to the disruption or termination of the relationship. But since these two goals are contradictory, families evolve strategies in an attempt to negotiate, through coordination, the identity-stability function in the relationship. The contradictions in logic that the family members bring to these situations are the manifestation of the difficulty they have in resolving the dilemmas inherent in the management of essential family functions. These observations suggest need for research to (1) identify how couples talk about their dilemmas and contradictions; (2) develop a taxonomy of family functions; (3) investigate the paradoxes in logic used in the process of coordination and rule development in the family; and (4) test effectiveness of strategies that stress the importance of communication skills but do not take into account the complexity of the family context. (JL)

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COMMUNICATION PATTERNS, CONTRADICTIONS, AND FAMILY FUNCTIONS

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Introduction

The family as an area of study is compelling because it provides a complex context for examining the dilemma of humans existing simultaneously as social creatures and as individuals. As social creatures we share bonds with other members of our culture which allow us to support each other in our attempts to provide for physical survival, nurture our children, develop and maintain emotional attachments, and validate and protect identities. At the same time, we are individuals with unique sets of experiences, needs, and goals which may be incompatible or in competition with those who are members of the same social system.

Our major thesis in this paper is that in "unpacking" or "teasing apart" a rules orientation toward the family, one discovers "a struggle with contradiction" at the core of the family's attempts to manage its major functions. Furthermore, the inherent nature of contradiction in family functioning is supported by the fact that paradoxes and double-binds have been identified as characteristic of so-called "healthy" couples as well as of distressed relationships (Harris, 1980). In our discussion we will assume a definition of the family similar to that of Palazzoli and her associates (1981): "the family is a self-regulating system which controls itself according to rules formed over a period of time through a process of trial and error."

Coordination

Basic to the concept of humans as social creatures is the notion that individuals coordinate their activities in order to achieve together what could not be achieved separately. Coordination occurs when the actions of one person are interrelated with the actions of another in order for both and/or either to attain some goal (Pearce, 1976).

Two assumptions are associated with the concept of coordination: (1) humans are viewed as choice-making agents and (2) human behavior is viewed as interdependent in coordination situations (Cushman and Craig, 1976). As active agents making purposive choice decisions among alternatives in a situation, individuals are capable of anticipating the actions of others, either from information which they possess about the other person directly or from prior experiences which are perceived as equivalent. The information which the interactants have about their expectations of each other enables them to contract a sequence of behaviors with one another. Motivation for coordination comes from the interdependent status of humans (Cushman and Craig, 1976). In significant areas of activity the attainment of one's goals can be achieved only in collusion or cooperation with others, in spite of the fact that the goals of the individuals taken separately may be different. In the process of negotiating cooperative behavior, interactants mutually influence each other. Interdependence and mutual influence create a condition of causality which is more usefully viewed as cyclical rather than linear.

Coordination is especially relevant to a discussion of family communication. Meaning in the family is achieved--that is, behavior is interpreted and evaluated--as members coordinate their activities through communication. Family members, in general, are not viewed as independent agents or as controlled agents but as choice-making agents having mutual influence over each other.

Human behavior as activity that is coordinated through communication is central to the rules theory approach toward analyzing human action and is relevant to a systems view of the family.

Rules Theory

An essential characteristic of coordination is its dependence upon rule-governed behavior. The theory that human behavior is rule-governed is based on a view of human action as nondeterministic. Rules theory contrasts rules to

laws (Shimanoff, 1980). Law-governed activity is deterministic. A rules theory approach to human behavior suggests that humans are powerful "generative mechanisms" capable of creating regularity out of chaos (Cushman and Whiting, 1972). As generative mechanisms, there is a forcing quality, a sense of natural necessity about human behavior which is not directly observable, but which may be "tracked" as patterns are identified. Consider the following syllogism:

> A wants to do X.
> Unless Y is done, X will not be attained.
> Therefore, Y must be done.

The choice-making nature of human agents, however, means that although an individual may set about to engage in Y, other circumstances may interfere and he or she may find that Y is not a sufficient condition for X. The view of the actor as agent of choice precludes a deterministic conception of human action.

There are three levels of theory construction about rules theory as an explanation of the coordination of human behavior (Buerkel-Rothfuss and Covert, 1982). At the first level are individual rules which are conceived of as ideosyncratic and unique to the person. Joan has a rule about putting her shoes away in the closet before bed or a rule that she should act reserved at parties.

At the second level are rules which are conceived of as standardized usages in given situations. Standardized usages may be conceptualized as social conventions which persist over time and which have broad application. The tendency of individuals to walk down the right side of a city sidewalk in the presence of other pedestrians walking in the opposite direction is an example of a standardized usage.

At the third level is the explication of the generative mechanism. This involves the tendency of persons to develop rules unique to a specific interaction situation and to repeat them until they become reflected in patterns of behavior. As mentioned earlier, humans operate as generative mechanisms for each other. That is, one person's behavior becomes a powerful forcing quality capable of evoking specific behavior from the other person. At the generative mechanism level, the focus of theorists and researchers is on explaining the "force for

regularity" in human behavior--that is, the nature of the forcing quality which moves people to develop rules which govern their interaction with each other and to repeat them until they become recognizable patterns.

There are four types of logic which can be seen as related to levels of theory construction about rules: 1) substitution, 2) systems, 3) motive, and 4) normative (Buerkel-Rothfuss and Covert, 1982).

Substitution logic is the logic operative when one alternative appears to be no more desirable or necessary than any other. As such, there are no regularities in the behavior; one alternative goal is as good as any other, and one alternative behavior is as good as any other. Not only is it impossible to predict which behavior will be emitted, uncertainty remains as to why any behavior is produced at all. A father's decision to get up a little earlier than usual on a Wed. morning in order to make pancakes for the family is an example of substitution logic.

Under systems' logic, the valued goals are specified, but are never actually reached. Such is the nature of open systems: movement toward a goal results in change in the system and, consequently, modifications of the desired goal. Such a process of movement toward a goal and subsequent change of the goal makes prediction virtually impossible without a thorough knowledge of the structure and functions of the system under investigation. The regularities in the conflict pattern of a couple are governed by systems' logic.

Under the third form of logic, motive, the practical force for regularity comes from within the individual actor. Motive logic deals with individual wants, needs, desires, and intentions. A mother may help her son with his homework in the evening because she believes that is what a good mother should do. This is the form of logic until now automatically associated with coordination problems--the one in which one agent is motivated to coordinate with another based on goals established or needs and wants recognized. How badly the agent wants something determines how doggedly s/he will work toward coordination and how much negotiation

s/he will tolerate relative to that goal. It does not follow that all agents involved in a coordination problem will be so motivated, however. What does follow is that those individuals who are motivated will attempt to take into account the other person.

Finally, it is necessary to consider normative logic. Under this form of logic, the force for regularity is imposed upon the system from the outside. In situations where people run into the same coordination problems regularly, institutions (legal, social, cultural, religious, etc.) have developed behavioral standardized usages for maintaining stability, and individuals receive rewards or sanctions based on their compliance with these rules. Countless numbers of such coordination situations could be described. Social rules governing the conditions under which someone may stand close to another person on an elevator involve normative logic. It would appear that the degree to which such situations are more or less regular varies with the number of witnesses to the behavior (how "public" or "private" the behavior is) and the agent's perceived desirability of the reward or severity of the punishment.

It should be apparent that interactions between logic are of special importance to coordination problems. There is always the possibility, for instance, that an individual's motives or intentions can conflict with systems' logic or normative logic.

The potential for conflict between types of logic creates the opportunity for contradictory communication transactions. Fran has a rule acquired from the learning experiences of the family that she grew up in which suggests that conflict is painful and potentially harmful to one's self-esteem. Fran and Tom also have a rule which suggests that acceptance of differences and avoidance of disagreement is negatively valued in their system because it will create an undesirable distance between them. In this example, there is a contradiction between the individual rule (motive logic) and the relationship rule (systems' logic).

The Role of Contradiction

Because levels of logic and types of logic often operate simultaneously in families, there is always the potential for contradiction in the system. It can be said that a certain amount of contradiction is unavoidable. Families are confronted with and create contradictions in the goals they develop, in their attempts to support the individual self-concepts of members while also pushing individuals to integrate their self pursuits with those of the family system as a whole, in their boundaries among subsystems which must be clear but, at the same time, permeable. Middle class families, for example, often develop goals which have to do with the need for individual personal achievement and goals which also necessitate setting aside significant amounts of time to participate in activities together as a family. Couples develop rules about honesty and spontaneity in their talk and also rules about caring and protecting each other's self-concepts.

In his review of the literature, Bochner (1982) describes the interpersonal bonding process, itself, as inherently contradictory. The bonding process allows one to acquire knowledge of the self which can only be gained through intimate discourse with another. Knowledge of the self permits differentiation--gives one a sense of himself or herself as differentiated from every other human. At the same time, the bonding process also pushes one toward integration of one's sense of self into the couple's interpersonal system. While the contradiction is apparent, Bochner indicates that the role of contradiction in communication has been explored very little.

Communication Patterns

As we mentioned earlier, human behavior and, more specifically, family behavior cannot be studied as simple cause-effect phenomena. Families are rule-governed systems of interdependent individuals whose interaction follows an intricate pattern of behavior.

A "pattern" is a fairly complex configuration of "moves" which have been repeated and repeated to attain the same goal so often that the emergent pattern has become automatic and generally below the threshold of conscious awareness of family members.

A communication pattern has seven distinguishing characteristics:

a. it is verbal and nonverbal;
b. it is specific to the relationship within the system;
c. it is recurring and predictable;
d. it is reciprocal and interactive;
e. it is relationship defining;
f. it is emergent; and
g. it may be changed by forces within the ecosystem or it may influence changes in that system.

By verbal and nonverbal, we mean that, to fully comprehend the complexity of a pattern, it is necessary to consider both the words and the numerous nonword elements in the message: tone of voice, eye contact, body posture, physical contact, facial expression, and so on.

To say that patterns are specific to relationships means that they are always "acted out" by the same "players". The patterns which develop between mother and child may be quite different than those between husband and wife or between brother and sister. Indeed, it is central to our perspective to argue that these communication patterns form the basis for all family role relationships.

Patterns are recurring and predictable because they perform some function for the family system. Just as reliance on STOP signs and traffic signals helps us to coordinate who has the right-of-way at an intersection, communication patterns help family members coordinate their efforts at expressing affection, demonstrating power or making decisions. They are recurring and predictable because they have worked for the family members involved in the past. Falling into established patterns of interaction is much simpler than renegotiating individual communication rules each time.

Patterns are reciprocal and interactive because they depend on complete cooperation from all individuals involved for their preservation. If one family member chooses to deviate from the rules specified for a given pattern, that

pattern will cease to exist. Similarly, patterns are relationship-defining because they incorporate implicit rules about who can be dominant, who can express affection, who can remain aloof from other family members, who can play the role of "victim", and so on.

Finally, patterns evolve out of previous pattern experiences (are emergent) and they are open to change from forces within the nuclear family and from the surrounding ecosystem. When old patterns fail to serve their allotted function, new patterns evolve to take their place. Likewise, changes in the nature and structure of the nuclear system may result in changes in family patterns, as in the case of intervention by a therapist or the death or departure of a family member.

We have described a communication pattern as a behavioral manifestation of coordination. Having described what we mean by a pattern, it is appropriate to make the connection between communication patterns and our discussion of contradiction. Family systems develop patterns of communicating in which contradictions emerge, are revealed, or are lived through. At the same time, there is a forcing quality, a compelling quality of the pattern in spite of the contradiction. Consider the following example:

> she complains of being overworked in her attempt to handle
> work and family obligations;
> he tells her to cut back on some of her commitments;
> she complains that she can't and that he doesn't understand;
> he offers to help out more with the cooking;
> she protests, insisting that she doesn't think it would work;
> he says that he thinks she is just a workhorse and walks away.

In this example, there may be a systems rule in this relationship which suggests that when one member is distressed, the other attempts to offer advice and support because the problem must be solved. On the other hand, she may have an individual rule which suggests that a woman cannot work full time and do all the things which only she can do that are necessary to carrying out her family obligations. This rule suggesting that the problem <u>cannot</u> be solved

contradicts the rule that the problem must be solved. In addition, he may have an individual rule which suggests that if his wife is distressed, he should help out. His rule conflicts with her rule that there are things which "only a woman/she can do." The communication pattern reflects and emerges from the contradiction in rules.

The implications of the role of contradiction in communication have been explored by theorists and researchers who have investigated the concept of paradox in the communication of couples and families (Harris, 1980; Palazzoli, et al, 1981; Cronen and Pearce, 1978; McNamee and Cronen, 1981).

It is our contention in this paper that understanding the role of contradiction in family communication can be facilitated by the knowledge of the function for the system which a particular pattern performs.

To help clarify this issue, it might be helpful to offer another example of a communication pattern:

> he tends to hide his feelings;
> she "picks at him," making chiding, even nasty, comments to "draw him out";
> he reaches the boiling point and hits her;
> she plays "victim" and sobs to her friends, taking comfort from their apparent sympathy;
> afraid of his anger, he tries even harder to hide his feelings.

In this example, it would be reasonable to look at the individuals and conclude that he is a "troubled" person for striking his wife or that she "provoked" the attack, depending on whose "side" we happen to be on or how one happens to punctuate the episode. Looking at the communication pattern, however, one can begin to identify some of the communication rules which underly their relationship. Remembering that either individual could choose to break the rules helps to underscore the importance of the pattern as a whole. For one, she is allowed to "pick at him," at least to a point. When she reaches that point, he is allowed to use physical force to terminate the interaction. After taking the abuse, she is allowed to feel sorry for herself and to share their secret with her friends, who give her the sympathy she desires. Note that she could choose

NOT to pick on him in the first place, or he could choose not to hit her or she could choose not to share this experience with her friends. Nevertheless, they act out this scene over and over. In a way, their pattern helps them to negotiate the emotional distance between them. Being hit justifies her seeking emotional support elsewhere. Being the aggressor permits him to withdraw from the relationship.

Family Functions

Cushman and Craig (1976) define a function, simply, as something that a system does and that it must do if it is not to break down. He offers examples of respiration in the human body, maintaining internal order in a political system, and regulating the level of affection in an interpersonal relationship as examples of functions. A function is related to an issue central to the operation, maintenance, or survival of the system, and has a defining quality for the system. One important characteristic of functions in families is that they tend to be related to basic polarities of human existence or to locations on a continuum. Hence, their relevance for understanding contradiction.

One example of a family function common in the literature is described in the work of Hess and Handel (1959) as the need of families to establish patterns having to do with the maintenance of separateness and connectedness. Hess and Handel explore issues concerning how families regulate their coming together and being apart. The potential dilemma or contradiction lies in the struggle to reinforce for family members both their sense of autonomy as individuals and their interdependence as an intimate system. Minuchin (1967) has identified those families operating at extreme ends of the polarity as disengaged and enmeshed. Kantor and Lehr (1976) examine family communication as central to the management of a distance-regulation function (closeness-distance) in the family. Fitzpatrick (1977) in her development of a typology of relationships among couples, explores affect or emotional expressiveness as a "basic domain of

relational life." Bochner (1982) discusses the dilemma between how much to reveal and how much to conceal in a relationship (revealing-concealing). The expression of affect and the communication of intimacy requires a certain amount of revealing about one's self and one's attitude toward and perceptions of the other. Revealing can also hurt, punish, and enhance one's vulnerability. In managing functions such as separateness-connectedness, distance-regulation, or emotional expressiveness there is always the potential for conflict and contradiction in the logic of the rules at various levels in the system.

There is no available taxonomy of family functions, but it is possible to elaborate on the relationship of coordination and contradiction to family functions by examining more specifically the operation of one family function.

Coordination in the Management of the Identity-Stability Function

The assumption that couples pursue in their relationships both the development and maintenance of personal identities and a sense of stability is a hypothesis explored and supported in the work of Askham (1976). Identity and stability involve the performance of a family function in that failure to achieve both usually (though, not always) leads to disruption or termination of the relationship. As a function, the two activities are interrelated and can be conceived of as a polarity in that the achievement of one depends upon the maintenance and regulation of the other.

In Askham's model, individuals are attracted to stable relationships because of the opportunity to develop a sense of personal identity through conversations with a significant other. At the same time, the stability of the relationship may be threatened by activities related to the pursuit of personal identities. In outlining some of the major conditions required as partners seek both identity and stability in the relationship, Askham (1976) illustrates the potential for contradiction in the management of this function.

The conception of how a sense of identity is achieved is based upon the work of the symbolic interactionists who argue that individual identity can be created only as the individual interacts with others. It is through interactions with others that one learns, not only the various social roles (wife, mother, husband, father, teacher, doctor) which make up identities but also how one perceives himself or herself as a unique human being. In developing the confidence that a person is who she thinks she is, one needs to interact with intimate others to whom the complexities of a unique self can be articulated (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). Along with the confirmation acquired in conversations with a significant other, however, contacts outside the relationship are necessary in order to confirm one's perceptions of his or her partner and to give one something to converse about with the significant other. In addition, periods of privacy are required to enable one to reflect on the other's interpretation of reality and to integrate potentially conflicting information about the self. With reflection and privacy also comes the potential for change, the impetus to seek new experiences, and the clarification of individual goals.

On the other hand, the conditions necessary for the development of identity are likely to be perceived as undermining of the couple's stability. Talk in which the uniqueness of the individual's needs, values, desires, and perceptions of reality are discovered may also underscore differences which are perceived as fragmenting to the relationship. In the pursuit of stability, contact with others who may offer support for a sense of identity incompatible with that of the significant other or who may interfere with the stability of the relationship are discouraged. As Askham argues:

> Thus, on the one hand, identity-maintenance requires open and wide-ranging conversation, a certain amount of privacy or independence, the possibility of new experiences and the development for each individual of a minimum of restricting objectification of roles, and the chance for intimate interaction with other persons. On the other hand, stability-maintenance requires the inhibition of all these factors. (p. 538+)

In her interviews with couples, Askham confirmed her hypothesis that it is in intimate relationships that both identity and stability are sought. In exploring how couples manage the contradictory nature of the two activities, Askham identified some (not all) of the alternative strategies that couples develop for coping with the situation.

Each of the strategies identified in Askham's work may be viewed as an attempt to negotiate, through coordination, the identity-stability function in the relationship. One option is for the couple to attempt a compromise in the pursuit of the two activities in which a "certain amount of stability is attained while at the same time each partner is allowed a certain amount of independence, etc. so that their sense of identity is not totally crushed." A second strategy is for the couple to alternate in stressing one need over the other. A couple may go through a phase where stability is stressed and mutual exploration of identity remains relatively repressed. After some time there may be a push to risk stability in order to achieve a greater sense of personal identity in the system. Another strategy is to focus activity at one end of the polarity at the expense of the other. A couple may subvert their personal identities in pursuit of stability and order or retain their independence and freedom to explore new experiences, risking the permanence and longevity of the relationship.

The management of the identity-stability function requires coordination. In the process of negotiating a coordinated solution to the identity-stability dilemma the couple will find themselves caught up in a complex set of rules, some operating at various levels in the system, all of which carry a forcing quality about them. Each individual will bring his or her own set of individual rules or motive logic concerning the relationship. It is likely that, given the inherent contradictory nature of the identity-stability function itself, the individual will have rules about his own behavior that will be contradictory. A rule such as, "One should be able to rely on, depend upon (i.e. be dependent upon), or can expect to be taken care of by his or her family whenever there

is the need," may coexist with another rule suggesting that, "One should also be a free and independent agent, able to accept responsibility for the consequences of his or her actions."

There is also the potential for contradiction between types of rules logic as well. Imagine a couple existing in a cultural mileau that promotes a normative rule suggesting that, "One is expected to always be faithful to his or her spouse." This couple may also have a systems rule (in which identity is given priority over stability) suggesting that, "One should be free to pursue his or her intellectual, spiritual, and sexual potential as a human being." The differences or contradictions in logic can be understood as manifestations of the difficulty family members have in resolving the dilemmas inherent in the management of essential family functions.

Conclusion

Our discussion is intended to provide a complex view of family interaction as a process involving coordination at various levels of logic, each level of which is potentially contradictory. The significance which the role of contradiction in coordination has for the family is construed as basic to the dilemmas and paradoxes confronting family members as they manage basic family functions. Communication patterns or redundancies in family interaction reflect ways in which contradictions are manifested or managed. Attending to relationships between coordination, contradiction, family functions, and patterned communication provides those interested in family communication with a complex, multidimensional interpretation resistant to deterministic or prescriptive analyses of family processes. More specifically, the ideas we have been discussing in this paper suggest that:

1. It may be useful to identify how couples talk about and perceive their relationship dilemmas and contradictions. The work of Askham provides

a model for the collection of this kind of information. It might be fruitful, however, to investigate how couples talk about other functions, in addition to identity and stability as they manage their relationship dilemmas.

2. The development of a taxonomy of family functions would enable us to move toward identifying crucial polarities operating in the family. While several basic functions can be identified from the family literature, few attempts have been made to identify conceptual connections and relationships among various functions which have been described.

3. Investigations and interventions which focus on paradoxes in logic provide recognition of the complex process of coordination and rule development in the family. The Coordinated Management of Meaning Theory (Pearce, 1976; Cronen and Pearce, 1978; McNamee and Cronen, 1981) is one such useful methodology for "unpacking" the levels of logic operating in the system. The family therapy work of the Milan Group (Palazzoli, et al, 1981) is especially exciting because of their success in using paradoxical injunctions to help troubled families out of painful dilemmas.

4. Strategies which prescribe effective communication skills as a way of improving the quality of family life or which undertake context-free message analyses of family interactions may fail to take into account the complexities of the family as a system operating within the structure of various types of rules logic simultaneously as it attempts to integrate polarities, manage contradictions, and live with paradoxes. Focusing on the function for the family of a communication pattern helps one to avoid the trap of oversimplifying complex family moves. One tends to be more cautious in "prescribing" competency skills to solve the family's problems. Consider the following observation from the work of the Milan Group of family therapists (Palazzoli, et al, 1981):

> The observation and the detailed classification of the communicational disturbances peculiar to the family in schizophrenic transaction certainly represent a conquest in the field of scientific research. For us, however,

> they represented a source of error as long as we sought to introduce change in the family through the correction of such communicational pecularities: correction which we based upon pointing out such pecularities and encouraging the reformulation of messages in the "correct" way. In other words, we tried to "teach" the family to communicate functionally. (p. 51)

Understanding that communication carries both content and relationship information is crucial in any attempt to understand what is "really" going on in the family.(Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson, 1967). The exploration and recognition of the role of contradiction and paradox is a necessary corollary to the identification of the relationship-defining aspect of messages. The communication patterns which develop from regularities in message episodes reveal, not only the nature of the relationship, but constitute a coordination attempt by the communicators to manage the polarities of an essential family function. Without some understanding of the role of contradiction in communication, we risk overestimating the importance of "effective communication"--or of clear and congruent communication--as a solution to every family's communication problems. Ultimately, unraveling the messages of the family can be seen as a process of identifying existential dilemmas and "teasing apart" the coping strategies of families as they negotiate the contradictions of family life.

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